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Cold War Entanglements of Social Science

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Cold War Social Science: Knowledge Production, Liberal Democracy, and Human Nature, edited by Mark Solovey and Hamilton Cravens, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, xviii + 270 pages, \$90.00, ISBN: 978 0 230 34050 3.

The Cold War era – the three decades between the end of the Second World War and the end of the Vietnam War – was a period of unprecedented institutional and professional expansion of the social sciences in the United States (Backhouse & Fontaine 2010; Calhoun 2007). The multi-authored volume under review, based on papers presented at a workshop held at the University of Toronto's Victoria College in 2010, approaches the complexities and controversies of this history from a wide variety of perspectives. Defining 'social science' broadly as the organized study of human nature and society with scientific claims (p. 6), it situates key elements of this field's institutionalization within the political and cultural framework of 'America's Cold War' (Farish 2010). More specifically, it focuses on the multiple ambiguous 'entanglements' (p. 14) of US social science in the military-industrial projects and politico-ideological agendas associated directly or indirectly with the maintenance of US national security and super-power supremacy in the era of Cold War tensions with the USSR.

In the Introduction (pp. 1-22), Mark Solovey discusses at length the usefulness of the label 'Cold War social science', which denotes a historically-specific form of doing social science that shaped this field in the United States during a defining period of its institutional development. It denotes that the Cold War was more than a mere historical or political context and suggests that US social science was deeply and controversially implicated in, as well as formed by, the Cold War, and that it is in some ways still haunted by its 'spectre' (p. 3). Yet what is at stake in the volume is not a familiar critique of the 'militarization' of US social science in this era (Robin 2001), but a much broader exploration of the complex and unpredictable 'enmeshing' of the agendas of social scientists, US government agencies (the military in particular), and political agents of all hues in post-war America.

In this context 'the Cold War' is made to stand for a number of different things, from a particular political climate (especially, but not exclusively, coloured by the struggle with 'the Communist threat') to new, 'soft' forms of warfare (demanding a strategic understanding of both enemy and ally societies, cultures and psychologies, as well as the development of technologically useful models of human nature). Yet the contexts framing particular case studies presented in the volume often go beyond the Cold War as such. Most chapters, in fact, reach back to the original mobilization of social science in US defence projects during the Second World War, of which 'Cold War social science' thus often appears to be merely an extension or modulation. Equally, the volume situates the post-war transformations of US social science in broader social and political developments, especially the emergence and

expansion of new left movements, such as those focused on race and gender, or in key technological advances, such as the appearance of the computer and the rise of television.

This relatively open and flexible approach allows the different authors to introduce into 'Cold War social science' a number of unanticipated elements and nuances that have in previous analyses not been automatically associated with this notion. Particularly significant here are the *ambivalences of political positioning* between right and left in which social science becomes embroiled. However, the extent to which 'Cold War social science' is developed here as a specifically *American* phenomenon, despite the fact that the Cold War was a global war (Westad 2006), is not discussed nearly enough. Indeed, in this volume 'Cold War social science', and the analytical perspective that this concept entails, is restricted to the historicization of the ambiguous political and institutional underpinnings of the *US* field of social science. Although the volume is rich and interesting enough in this respect, a more sustained discussion of the potentials of a comparative approach, namely of what 'Cold War social science' might mean (politically and otherwise) beyond the United States, especially in the post-war Soviet Union, but also in a recovering Western Europe, would have added depth to our understanding of the concept and enhanced its usefulness in historical analysis.

At the forefront of the book's concerns is the examination of the productive, as well as problematic, nexus of state and academic agendas, specifically the interface of military strategizing, politico-ideological engagements, and social-scientific knowledge production. In addition to this, the volume exemplifies, if often only tacitly, a particularly interesting approach to the historicization of 'social science' as a techno-scientific field more generally. The different contributors regularly factor into their analyses significant macro developments, such as the post-war emphasis on 'big science' patronized by large state or private funding bodies, or major paradigm shifts, such as the rise and fall of behaviourism or of grand theory building. However, the volume's key strengths are in its micro-historical approach, which presents 'social science' as a fundamentally *heterogeneous and unsystematic* field of academic endeavour. Social science is here made up less of disciplines or paradigms and more of a plurality of relatively short-term *projects, enterprises and movements*. These emerge through the concrete mobilization and organization of scientific work, and then invariably disintegrate, or else shift into some other enterprise, either within or outside of the academic field (Frickel & Gross 2005). And needless to say, the diverse projects that make up 'social science' in history are never simply or straightforwardly 'scientific', but involve a range of significant stakeholders with alternative interests and purposes, which in this volume are located in the context of the (US) 'Cold War'.

Each of the book's chapters is a case study illustrating such an understanding of 'social science'. For example, David C. Engerman (pp. 25-43) tells the story of the rise and fall of the Harvard Refugee Interview Project (1950-54), designed to understand 'Russia and the Russian' (p. 26) for predominantly strategic military purposes. This was conducted by way of structured and in-depth interviews of 'displaced persons' from the Soviet Union in the American zone of occupied Germany. Engerman shows persuasively the 'militarization' of academia and the 'academization' of the military at the juncture where the Second World War morphed into the Cold War. The focus of his analysis is, however, on politics within

social science itself, namely the formation of Harvard's new, behaviourist Department of Social Relations (DSR) and the strategic role occupied in it by the Russian Research Centre. The latter's purpose was to apply the methods of behavioural research to a systematic as well as pragmatic study of Soviet society, and to develop an exemplary model for interdisciplinary policy-oriented social science. Yet as Engerman shows, the outcome of this ambitious programme failed to respond efficiently enough to the Pentagon's strategic needs, leading to divisions in the military, a series of critical Congressional inquiries, and eventually the project's closure.

In another chapter Joel Isaac (pp. 79-95) reveals also the importance that Harvard's DSR placed on the problem of arranging empirical data (especially those generated in the study of small social groups), into configurations that allowed this data's direct insertion into a general theory of social systems. Isaac dubs this the problem of 'epistemic design' and explores its development in the project known as The Values Study, which involved the systematic coding and comparison of the folkways of five distinct 'small groups' (a Navajo reservation settlement, a Zuni pueblo, a Mormon community, a group of Texan and Oklahoman homesteaders, and a Spanish-American village). Isaac argues that this project's emphasis on formalizing supposedly 'neutral' social data in a theoretically pertinent way was closely connected to DSR's negotiation of the *autonomy* of the new sciences of human behaviour in the context of policy-related strategic frameworks imposed by the military and other sponsors.

A number of other case studies similarly demonstrate the importance of situating the analysis of particular technologies of scientific production at the interface between, on the one hand, narrow scientific legitimization of a particular social science enterprise and, on the other, wider claims made in the social, political or military realm. For instance, Kaya Tolon (pp. 45-62) examines the flourishing of the so-called Futures Studies Movement, which emerged as a fusion of mathematical models of strategic thinking developed in the 1950s by the RAND Corporation (the social sciences arm of the US Air Force), and the 1960s-70s push for new quantitative and predictive methodologies in policy-oriented social science research. Tolon emphasises the broad social movement dimension of Futures Studies and its ambivalent success as a scientific endeavour, despite the backing it received from high-status academics and politicians alike. Janet Martin-Nielsen (pp. 63-78) analyses the way the emergence of computers impacted on linguistics in the US, focusing on considerable military and civilian investments in the ultimately failed Machine Translation Project during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Martin-Nielsen connects this to the historically highly significant harnessing of emergent computer technologies in the American linguists' efforts to transform their work into legitimate 'science'.

The volume also addresses the wider ideological implications of social science in this era. For instance, Hunter Heyck (pp. 99-116) charts the rise of theories of decision-making in post-war America, conceptualising them as an effort to develop a new model of rationality in the face of growing pessimism about the ability of human beings to govern themselves in a rational way. The latter attitude was, however, paralleled by considerable optimism about the possibility of designing *artificial* systems that would generate rational choices automatically,

something closely aligned with the interests of patrons from the military and large business corporations. This project entailed redefining reason by shifting the unit of analysis from the all too fallible human decision-maker to the rationality of the choices themselves. Yet, by the 1970s, the foregrounding of the *rationality* of choice gave way to a new emphasis on the *freedom* of choice (whether in the economic or the social context), something that Heyck associates with further shifts in the Cold War articulations of liberal democratic values in contrast to the Soviet ‘other’.

What is especially important in this context is the volume’s stress on the ambivalent positioning of social science between the political left and right respectively. Thus, Joy Rohde (pp. 137-153) examines the controversy surrounding the Special Operations Research Office (SORO) based at the American University in Washington, DC and sponsored by the Pentagon. This unit was envisaged at the time as an example of the military delegating its knowledge base to civilian experts. However, SORO was devoted not only to the impartial social study of the Third World, but also to developing strategically-significant research, such as projects designed to anticipate and prevent Communist revolutions or to promote anti-Communist groups in developing countries. Rohde focuses in particular on the effect of the debacle of this enterprise in the late 1960s in the face of growing public opposition to the Vietnam War, which led to vigorous student campaigns to oust Pentagon-funded centres from the universities. Despite the apparent success of this action, this type of strategic research continued unabated off campus. This meant that the vilified ‘military-academic-industrial complex’ was by no means dismantled, but only became less accountable to evolving scientific standards. And, conversely, the knowledge base that national security organs now referred to was more difficult to challenge since it circulated in small-scale classified reports, rather than open-access academic publications.

The editors have put the fragmentary approach of the ‘collected essays’ format to good use, while ensuring systematic cross-referencing and thematic interlinking between the assembled case studies. The arguments put forward in each chapter are not definitive statements on their respective topics, but they are all invariably very interesting and informative, and the angles of approach chosen by the contributors are both insightful and thought-provoking. The volume would, however, have benefitted from a more sustained concluding discussion of the historical legacies of Cold War developments in the contemporary social sciences. The suggestion by the volume’s editors that the enterprise of American social science had effectively been made in the period in question is a persuasive one; yet it begs the question of whether and how things might have changed after the collapse of the Berlin Wall or, for instance, after 9/11. Particularly significant here is the thorny issue of the continued dependence of the project of ‘social science’ as such on the welfare/warfare state. This is why this book can be read as an instructive series of ‘lessons from history’, which reveal in an original and enlightening way the considerable intellectual and institutional complexities of the formative relationship between the social sciences and its patrons, something that social scientists are increasingly grappling with today, both in the practical management of their projects, and in the articulation of the legitimacy of their work as ‘science’.

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Biography:

Andy Byford has occupied the post of Lecturer in Russian at Durham University since 2009. He was previously Research Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford. He has published widely in the history of humanities scholarship, and human and social sciences, particularly in Russia and the USSR. His monograph, *Literary Scholarship in Late Imperial Russia, 1870s-1917: Rituals of Academic Institutionalization*, came out in 2007. He is currently writing a book on the history of Russian 'child science' as a professional and scientific movement in the late tsarist and early Soviet period (for details see <http://www.dur.ac.uk/russianchildscience/>).